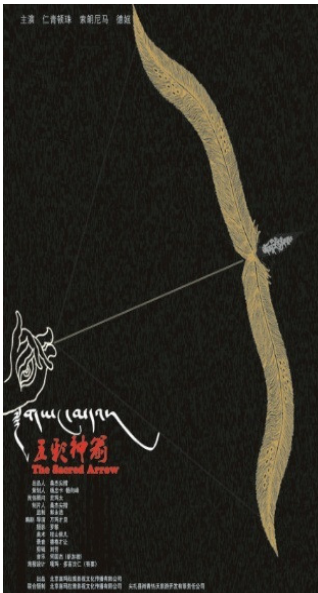


REVIEW: *THARLO* AND *THE SACRED ARROW*

Reviewed by Khashem Gyal



Pema Tseden (Pad+ma tshe brtan པདྨ་ཙེད་བརྟན།; director and screenplay), Lü Songye 吕松野 (cinematography), Gdugs dkar tshe ring གདུག་ཅམ་ཙེ་རིང་། (sound designer), Song Bing 宋冰 (editor), Stag rtse don 'grub ལྷ་གཙེ་དོན་འགྲུབ། (production designer), Zhi bde nyi ma ཞི་བདེ་ཉི་མ་ and G.yang phyug mtsho གཡང་ཕུག་མཚོ། (performers), and Wu Leilei 吴蕾蕾 and Wang Xuebo 王学博 (producers). 2015 *Tharlo* ཐ་ར་ལོ་. International sales: Asian Shadows. 123 mins. B&W.



Pema Tseden (Pad+ma tshe brtan པདྨ་ཙེད་བརྟན།; director and screenplay), Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho སངས་རྒྱལ་རྒྱ་མཚོ། (executive producer), Hodoyama Yiho (Chengshan Yifan) 程山依凡 (production designer), Luo Pan 罗攀 (director of photography), Ricky Ho (He Guojie) 何国杰 (music), Gdugs dkar tshe ring གདུག་ཅམ་ཙེ་རིང་། (sound), Liu Fang 刘芳 (editor), Rin chen don grub རིན་ཆེན་དོན་གྲུབ།, Bsod nmas nyi ma བསོད་ནམས་ཉི་མ་, and Bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིད།, Stobs rgyas ལྷོ་བས་རྒྱལ།, Blo bzang chos 'phel ལྷོ་བཟང་ཆོས་འཕེལ། (performers). 2014. *G.yang mda'* གཡང་མདའ། [*The Sacred Arrow*]. Production company: Beijing Himalaya Audio & Visual Culture Communication Co., Ltd. 97 minutes.

Khashem Gyal. 2017. Review: *Tharlo* and the *Sacred Arrow*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:187-209.

Pema Tseden was born in 1969 in, at that time, the relatively remote Mdzo sna (Zuona) Village, La zhi ba (Laxiwa) Township, Khri ka (Guide) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China in an area of great natural beauty on the banks of the Rma chu (Yellow River). Pema Tseden recalls his grandfather as an adept lay tantric practitioner whose compassion and warm-heartedness deeply affected him:

My grandfather believed that I was the reincarnation of his grandfather. He told me that my previous life was that of a meditator. Grandfather showed me the scriptures that his own grandfather had used in his life and my great-grandfather's meditation place in our home. My grandfather's grandfather was very good to him and he felt that he owed him a debt. Grandfather insisted my previous life had gained a great deal of religious knowledge. Thus, he also wanted me to be well-educated. At that time, you could be employed after junior middle school so very few students continued on to senior middle school, let alone attended college (Feng 2015).¹

Pema Tseden continued schooling after graduating from his village school and completed a college education, thanks to significant financial and emotional support from his grandfather. This was at a time when many rural Tibetans questioned the value of formal state-sponsored education.

Folktales have played a vital role in Pema Tseden's literary endeavors and filmmaking. In his childhood, there were few media entertainment resources, however, folktales such as those in the *Ro sgrung* 'Enchanted Corpse'² told by older family members in his family were an inspiring source of entertainment. Pema recalls accidentally finding a torn, worn-out old book on the road by his village

¹ This is my abridged translation of the Chinese. Pema Tseden also shared parts of this same narrative when I interviewed him in May 2016.

² The "Enchanted Corpse" collection of tales have long interested scholars involved with Buddhism and verbal culture in southern and central Asia (Mikos 2012:5). For a modern version retold in English, see Benson (2007).

when he was in junior middle school. At first, he did not know what the book was, but then he later realized it was a Chinese-language version of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Its compelling stories created an invisible world and deeply attracted Pema Tseden. In addition, colorful images drawn from local folktales, like hundreds of invisible movies projected on the black screen of his imagination, further occupied Pema Tseden's childhood.

During this time, Pema Tseden frequently watched films in his village, which were organized by the Mobile Screen Team. Berry (2016:2) commented on this:

During the Mao era and into 1980s, when the film industry was state-owned and directed, these films depicted the 55 recognized minority nationalities of the PRC in ways that communicated the government's message about its policy toward them.

At a small hydropower station near his village, Pema Tseden had the opportunity to watch films that differed from those he saw in the village. One of the most memorable was *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936). All of the films were projected on a screen with a film projector operated by the station employees.

In many rural areas during the 1970s in China, there was often a lack of knowledge of events in the outside world. Pema Tseden's grandfather gave him a luxury - a small transistor radio - that became his best friend, enlivening the days he spent herding on the mountains. He was fascinated by the vivid characters conjured by sounds emanating from his little box. He was particularly spellbound by dramas. Pema Tseden told me, "The power of radio story telling strongly impacted me in my childhood. Now that I think about it, I never expected that those seemingly insignificant childhood incidents would impact my future career."¹

After entering the Nationalities Middle School in Khri ka County, Pema Tseden was able to watch even more films each week that were organized by the school. He also used his pocket money to

¹ Based on my interview with Pema Tseden in late May 2016 via WeChat.

go to the county town cinema every weekend. In three years of junior middle school, he estimated that he watched over 300 films. Watching films continued along his education journey from junior middle school in the county town, senior middle school in the prefecture town, and Northwest University for Nationalities in Lanzhou, Gansu Province.¹

He studied Tibetan Language and Literature while at university and worked as a primary school teacher and a civil servant. He later studied at Beijing Film Academy, China's most prestigious film school, thus becoming the Academy's first ever Tibetan student (Asia Society 2010).

In 1991, Pema Tseden began composing literary works and was a well-known writer and novelist in Amdo before entering film school. "His short stories have appeared in the literary magazines such as *Light Rain*, *Mang tshogs sgyu rtsal* (Folk art and literature), and *Lho kha'i rtsom rig sgyu rtsal* (Lhoka literature and art)" (Virtanen 2008:252). He has written novels and essays in both Tibetan and Chinese, some of which have been translated into English, French, Japanese, Czech, and (Tibetan versions) Chinese. He also actively translates Tibetan to Chinese, for example, *Song of the Life* by Stag 'bum rgyal, which received the 2011 Minority Literary Award in Beijing. He has also translated selected Tibetan popular folktales into Chinese (Frangville 2016:11).

Pema Tseden began making films in 2006, while continuing to write. In Pema Tseden's *Grong khyer gyi 'tsho ba 'Life in Town'* "we see a striking contrast in the way the relationship between the traditional and the modern is portrayed" (Virtanen 2008:253). Some elements of Pema Tseden's literary works are depicted in his films consequently, both his film and literary works share similarity in their interpretations of social change and its impact and meaning. In dealing in both literary and film productions, Pema Tseden crosses between the two worlds of "letters" and "images," representing Tibet's conflicts and bewilderments.

Much contemporary Tibetan literary and art work share a sense of losing rootedness in a time of rapid social change. Many writers,

¹ Based on my interview with Pema Tseden in late May 2016 via WeChat.

including Pema Tseden, have left their rural homelands and dwell in towns and cities.

I go back home frequently, and sometimes I go back and stay there for a while. I have been living outside, mostly in Beijing, for many years now. When I consider my home, I see it through the lenses of an outsider, a bystander. It is inevitable, but that allows me a more objective, calmer perception.¹

However, it seems difficult to return to one's roots in terms of the physic, inner world: "It's hard to return with real soul" (Pema Tsedan).² Along the journey farther away from "home" in a village to county town, to Lanzhou City, to Beijing, a multifaceted sense of identity also has become a general concern in his work.

When dealing with the question of what compels him to engage film, he said,

I have been inherently very interested in film since childhood.³ ... There are so many Tibetan related films today, however, very few present real Tibetan life and reflect Tibetans' inner world. What non-Tibetan directors who never lived in Tibet usually see is on the surface, for example, landscape, customs, and so on. This is another motivation that encouraged me to make films (Feng 2015).

When I made similar inquiries during an interview, Pema Tsedan said:

Cinema is a burgeoning culture in Tibet so there is a lack of awareness. I hope by making films that I can promote this sprouting culture in Tibet. There are thousands of films coming out annually, however, it is very difficult to achieve a high artistic level. I'm trying hard to produce films that

¹ <http://goo.gl/zW3FUW>, accessed 6 April 2016. What I present here is my abridged translation.

² <http://goo.gl/VCCDp8>, accessed 23 June 2014.

³ <http://goo.gl/kpoZuL>, accessed in 2009.

can reach an international level based on Tibetan culture and exploration of movie art.¹

THARLO ཐར་ལོ།

Tharlo follows in the footsteps of Pema Tsenden's *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005), *The Search* (2009), *Old Dog* (2011), and *The Sacred Arrow* (2014). *Tharlo* has attracted audiences both in China and internationally. Nominated for the Orizzonti section of the Venice Film Festival (2015), it was also nominated for four awards at the Golden Horse Film Festival in Taiwan, where it won the Best Adapted Screenplay Award.

Tharlo opens on a black screen to the accompaniment of melodious chanting of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*. Gradually, a man in his forties wearing a sheep-wool hat materializes. An orphan who does not know his exact age nor his real name, he has herded sheep on the mountains since childhood. He has been known as "Ponytail" since childhood. He can recite "Serve the People," a section from the *Little Red Book*, without a single mistake, which greatly impresses Rdo rje, a local policeman.

Rdo rje orders Tharlo to obtain an identity card from the local police station, but tells him to first go to the Bde skyid Photo Studio and have his ID photo taken. Tharlo then leaves his familiar pasture and heads for the town, where the photo studio proprietor recommends that he cross the road to a salon and have his hair washed in order to look his best in the ID photo.

G.yang mtsho, the hairdresser, is the first Tibetan woman with short hair Tharlo has ever encountered. While washing Tharlo's hair, she asks, "How many sheep do you have?"

"I have 375 sheep," Tharlo promptly replies.

G.yang mtsho slows her shampoo work, stares at Tharlo for a few seconds, and follows with, "How much are they worth?"

¹ Based on my interview with Pema Tsenden in late May 2016 via WeChat.

Tharlo replies with details of the cash value of the sheep based on their sex and age. He concludes, "Probably they are worth 160,000 to 170,000 RMB."

Suitably impressed, G.yang mtsho tells him that he is more handsome with his now clean, long hair and adds, "I have short hair because I have been hoping to meet a long-haired, handsome man like you."

Tharlo takes fifty RMB from his pocket and hands it to her. G.yang mtsho says, "I can't change your money."

Tharlo says, "You don't need to give me any change," and abruptly leaves in an emotional upheaval. It is the first time a woman has told him that he is handsome.

Tharlo returns to the photo studio and has his picture taken. While waiting for the photograph to be printed, Tharlo revisits the hairdresser, who flatters, "You really are a handsome man," and invites him to a karaoke bar that night.

At the karaoke bar, G.yang mtsho sings, *It's My Destiny to Meet You*, a modern Tibetan song sung in Chinese, followed by *Leave the Mountains* sung in Tibetan.

After a few seconds of hesitation, Tharlo responds by singing a Tibetan love song.

G.yang mtsho expresses interest in love songs and Tharlo promises her he will learn more when they meet next time.

The next morning, Tharlo is drunk and lying in bed with G.yang mtsho. She declares that she no longer wants to stay in the town and suggests that they leave together for Lha sa, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, or beyond.

Tharlo leaves. After delivering the ID photo to the local township police station, he drives back to the mountains on his motorcycle after purchasing a box of liquor and fifty firecrackers. In the mountains, Tharlo learns love songs, drinks heavily, and dreams of G.yang mtsho and the next time he can meet her and they can enjoy karaoke together.

While Tharlo is passed out from heavy drinking, many of his sheep are attacked and killed by wolves. Subsequently, Tharlo is

humiliated and beaten by the sheep owner's son, Sbyin pa. Intending to pick up his ID card in town and then leave with G.yang mtsho, he drives to town and gives her 160,000 RMB (US\$25,000). This represents his entire life savings on top of the proceeds of selling the sheep.

G.yang mtsho understands that Tharlo would only have this much money if he had sold the sheep. Imagining that men will soon be searching for him, she suggests he cut his long hair, so nobody will recognize him. Tharlo agrees and then this Tibetan Delilah cuts off his long hair.

That evening, Tharlo is eager to sing the love songs that he has learned on the mountains at the karaoke bar. G.yang mtsho, however, takes him to a party hosted by a locally famous singer. Tharlo gets drunk again that night.

The next morning, he finds himself alone on G.yang mtso's bed. With effort, he gets up and anxiously looks for his clothes. The frame shakes as music, suggesting panic, increases our sense of Tharlo's anxiety.

Tharlo searches for G.yang mtsho in every corner of the town - the karaoke bar, the photo studio, and the barber shop. She is gone. She has fled.

Unbalanced framing, natural light, a bumpy dirt road, a disordered street, and the continual noise of motors and construction activity create a sense of depression emphasizing the melancholy of Tharlo's inner world and the "civilizing" town.

Tharlo features scenes with deftly crafted color, lighting, modeling, props, performance scheduling, and sound. At the very beginning of the film, the director introduces the main character in a dramatic way. Tharlo recites "Serve the People," but we also hear something feeding in the opening scene. Gradually, a man in front of a slogan in large Chinese characters on a wall comes into view, as does a little lamb in the man's shoulder bag. We later learn that wolves killed the lamb's mother. As Tharlo finishes his recitation and as he turns to Chief Rdo rje, we notice a ponytail under his sheep-wool hat. During conversation, Tharlo feeds the little lamb from a small bottle taken

from his shoulder bag. The use of a sheep-wool hat, ponytail, the little lamb, and conversation with Chief Rdo rje powerfully communicate Tharlo's vocation and character.

Gradually, we realize that this is a black and white production indicative of Tharlo's world, a realm of only good and evil, emphasizing this journey from a state of *naïve*, pure trust and belief to the loss of identity, made even more poignant because the accompanying pain and suffering is self-inflicted.

In a few seconds, the director captures the transition of society and ways in which vulnerable individuals lose their identity in what at times seems an almost instantaneous transition from the traditional to being a "modern, civilized" global citizen. For example, while Tharlo is in the photography studio, a couple is taking a wedding photo. The background photo behind the couple changes - Lha sa... Beijing... New York City... - and the couple's clothes change from Tibetan robes to Western-style clothing. Bleating from Tharlo's bag draws their attention. They ask Tharlo if they can have a photo with his little lamb, and confide that they are former herders.

In this scene, the director seems to comment on how easy it is to enter and operate in a world of international modernity, regardless of our location, but how difficult it is to create an intimate relationship from pure, innocent hearts. This is the kind of relationship that Tharlo imagines he has achieved with G.yang mtsho, who then cruelly dupes him.

I want to particularly comment on a scene that visually illustrates the relationship between Tharlo and G.yang mtsho, the hairdresser. At the hair salon, numerous props are used to reference the characters within a certain space. For example, the entire dialogue between Tharlo and G.yang mtsho takes place in a mirror, suggesting that what is happening in the mirror is a sham because G.yang mtsho's sweet, insincere words hide her true purpose. The mirror is divided into two sections, suggestive of two different worlds. Tharlo is at the edge of the image while G.yang mtsho occupies the larger part of the space. Tharlo is on the lower side while G.yang mtsho is in a comparatively higher position than Tharlo, hinting at the inferiority

and superiority of the two characters, reflecting strength and weakness, domination and marginality.

How does the film express Tharlo's inner loneliness? There is no dialogue as Tharlo herds and while he is in his hut on the mountain. The use of firecrackers, a radio, sheep, a Tibetan mastiff, prayer flags, scarecrows that keep the wolves at bay, and the sounds of nature emphasize a world full of loneliness.

Tharlo thinks of G.yang mtsho while sitting woodenly as his sheep move forward, marginalizing him. From a vast wide angle, we only see Tharlo's back as he gazes at a place far beyond the mountains before him as wind buffets his heart and flutters the prayer flags by the hut.

At night before going to bed, Tharlo uses firecrackers to scare away the wolves, whose terrifying howls resound from the distant mountains as Tharlo smokes thoughtfully under the shimmering light of a small butter lamp. When he opens his hut door and comes out to light the firecrackers, a shining light from the open door pierces the darkness of the vast pasture. Tharlo walks some distance and then sets off the firecrackers. The ensuing rattle-tattle, vivid sparks in the black sky, and the barking of his Tibetan mastiff accentuate the silence of the pasture.

In his hut, Tharlo drinks and intently listens to love songs on the radio. He is intoxicated within the invisible space created by the love song lyrics and the liquor. When Tharlo drinks water from a bucket, the camera turns to the surface in front of him, displaying an inverted wavy image of Tharlo, insinuating his unstable mental world and what will likely happen.

Wolves attack and sheep die, including the little lamb - symbolic of Tharlo's unsullied inner world. This greatly distresses Tharlo, who had believed herding was a way to serve the people. He has now lost this sense of guiding obligation. As he boils flesh from the sheep killed by the wolves and then eats it, the beautiful thoughts he has of his lover and the great happiness it brings him conflicts with the cruel reality of losing his belief - the desire to "Serve the People."

At night after eating boiled meat, Tharlo gazes at a dark path in the mountains far beyond his back that is featured only in a wide-angle frame. After a few seconds, he gets up and lights a pile of dry grass. The subsequent light dances about as sharp, dark mountain winds whip the blaze. The crackle of the fire implies his eagerness to escape from the mountains, and provides further insight into his thoughts.

Indulgence in alcohol and smoking suggest weakness of character, creating a basis for ensuing events. Movement between the mountain and the township town indirectly illustrates the route of Tharlo's downward spiral.

At the very end of the film, Tharlo stops his motorcycle on a bridge under the snow-capped mountains along a long, zigzag road. He lights a cigarette, opens a bottle of liquor, and ponders. We only see a side profile of Tharlo. After a few minutes of drinking he smashes the bottle, takes out a firecracker from his shoulder bag, and lights it. The firecracker explodes. With a long, cold shot, the screen turns black, accompanied by a recitation of "Serve the People."

Concern for cultural identity and individual predicament are recurrent concerns in Pema Tsenden's calm, yet profoundly emotional films. Using a Tibetan character in *Tharlo*, the very nature of individual identity under the powerful, invasive wave of modern "civilization" and the sacrifices behind "development" are called into question. The heart of Tharlo's experience, sense of dislocation and loss, and longing for what modernity has to offer is familiar in other parts of the world, although perhaps expressed in somewhat different forms. *Tharlo* is thus a universal story, transcending boundaries between Tibetan and Chinese.

THE SACRED ARROW གཡུང་མཛེས་ལྷ་མོ།

Pema Tsenden has not only coped with the constraints of his creative situation, including the isolation of Tibet, political censorship, and the economic requirements of the cinematic form, but he has also

transformed them into powerful visual images of the isolated human psyche in its quest (Lo and Yeung 2016).

The Sacred Arrow is Pema Tseden's fourth film, following the path of his ambivalent exploration of tradition and modernity among contemporary Tibetans. *The Sacred Arrow* won an award for Best Cinematography at the 17th Shanghai International Film Festival (2014), and received recognition at various other international and national film festivals. Shot in Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous, Mtso sngon (Qinghai) Province, *The Sacred Arrow* is set in A mdo, as are his previous films.

The film opens with a grand Tibetan-style melody hummed with a *ma rtse ma* 'tantric mantra' along with orchestral instrumental accompaniment as dim images move across a screen of *thang kha* murals related to Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje (Pelgyi Dorje),¹ who fled from Dbus gtsang (U-Tsang) to A mdo after assassinating King Khri 'U'i dum brtsan (r. 841-842). The king had persecuted the "Sangha in central Tibet... during which he attempted to eradicate Buddhism in Tibet" (Blo rtan rdo rje et al. 2009:12). Images on the screen project Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje, who:

fled on a white horse that had been colored black with charcoal, and wearing the black side of a reversible two-toned robe. Crossing a river, the horse was washed white, and Pelgyi Dorje reversed the robe to show the white side, thereby evading soldiers in pursuit (Mandelbaum 2007).

According to popular accounts, after reaching A mdo, he hid the bow and arrow at Lo rdo rje brag Cave and meditated. Later generations thrived and made an arrow commemorating the arrow used in the assassination.

The film then switches to a black screen that transitions to an archery competition between two groups of archers. The Lha lung group wears red shirts and the Mda' mo group wears white shirts. Both wear similar Tibetan robes and use traditional-style bows and arrows

¹ See <http://goo.gl/KUcVKL> (accessed 31 July 2016) for more on Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje.

in a vigorous rivalry emphasized by robust screaming as sunset lighting pierces the floating dust on the flat top of a mountain.

A local TV reporter in front of a camera reports on the annual final competition and the best two archers from each of two villages - Bkra don from Lha lung and Nyi ma from Mda' mo. After keen competition, Bkra don loses in a final round to Nyi ma, a calm, thoughtful man who is in love with Bkra don's sister, Bde skyid.

This is the second consecutive year that Mda' mo Village wins the contest. The shame of losing leads Bkra don to drink with his friends in a forest near Lha lung Village. Skal bzang rdo rje, Bkra don's brother, says he has damaged their village's reputation when he approaches them in the forest while they are drinking.

The archery competition between Lha lung and Mda' mo is part of local culture and has been maintained for centuries in a harmonious rivalry with little concern over which village owns the *gyang mda'* 'sacred arrow' from year to year. This year, however, Bkra don cares a great deal about the surface layer of the competition - reputation and prestige - than about the harmony and joy that traditionally undergirded the event. His deeply felt humiliation leads to numerous unfortunate consequences and propels the story forward.

That same night, villagers watch a film on the threshing ground. Skal bzang rdo rje arranges a competition to be held a month later for boys, hoping to regain honor for his village. Meanwhile, one of Bdra don's friends finds him and reports that Nyi ma and Bde skyid are having a romantic rendezvous in the forest. Bdra don mounts his motorcycle and speeds off. When he finds them, he is enraged.

Nyi ma says, "You lose and you act like this. Act like a man if you are one."

Bdra don replies angrily, "Did you just say I'm not a real man?"

Bkra don says, "You are like a dog."

"You are like a yak," Nyi ma replies.

Bdra don pulls a bottle of beer from his robe pouch and breaks it across Nyi ma's head. Beer suds cover Nyi ma's black hair and two lines of blood stream down his face.

Next morning, the villager chief and Bdra don's father take a sheep on their motorcycle to formally apologize according to the local custom, for Bdra don's behavior. Bkra don's father feels very guilty as he apologizes to Nyi ma's mother. Meanwhile, Nyi ma's father mentions Nyi ma and Bde skyid's possible marriage.

Bde skyid's father indicates agreement on the condition that they love each other. On the way back to their village, Bde skyid's father and the village head discuss the coming *lab tse*¹ ritual and '*cham* dance, and express concern over finding enough young men to participate, given that most young people are outside the village engaged in migrant labor.

Ensuing scenes show Lha lung archers cutting trees for the *lab tse* ritual and a brief introduction to making a good arrow is conveyed through conversation between Bdra don's father and his younger son, Skal bzang rdo rje. A competition between boys from the two villages is held in front of Lo rdo rje brag Cave. The competition ends in victory for Lha lung and humiliation for Mda' mo.

A humorous story is told while Dbra don's mother, Bde skyid, and daughter-in-law are baking traditional bread: a village girl brought a loaf of bread to an archery celebration. When it is discovered that it was discovered that it was not cooked through, it became a widely-told joke and the girl was never able to marry.

Lha lung Village's *lab tse* ritual take place on a nearby sacred mountain, a mountain deity is praised, *rlung rta* 'wind horses' are tossed into the sky, and participants scream and circumambulate the *lab tse* while led by a *sngags pa* 'lay tantric practitioner'. On the way back to the '*cham* dance from the *lab tse*, Bdra don arranges an archery contest with Nyi ma privately in a dense forest. He proposes they shoot

¹ *Lab tse* refers to arrows and spears with flags attached inserted in heaps of stone atop mountain peaks in Tibetan areas. Origins of *lab tse* may trace to Tibetan soldiers making wooden frames for their weapons; Tibetan troops constructing such structures to signal control after occupying new lands; storage areas for weapons that mountain deities might utilize in battles; and sites where weapons were collected and put on striking summits in plain view to suggest a credible peace between tribes (Stuart et al. 1995, Xing 1992).

balloons among the trees while riding motorcycles. He promises if Nyi ma wins, he will not interrupt his marriage with his sister. Intense competition follows and Bkar don loses terribly.

As they compete, villagers impatiently wait for Bkra don to lead the '*cham* dance at the village temple. An awkward conversation ensues when Bkra don's arrives: "There are also certain steps. You can't just dance any which way. The deities won't be happy with that," he says.

"Father, so many rules! What century is it?" Bkra don replies.

While dancing, Nyi ma exits the temple, approaches Bde skyid in full view of the assembled villagers, gives her a ring, and says, "I'm going to marry you." This is a discomfiting moment. Tibetans in the area where the film was shot do not discuss romantic love between men and women in front of relatives, nor in public.

Suddenly, Bkra don appears in the frame. He is poised to shoot Nyima, who responds by notching an arrow and aiming at Bkra don. Villagers watch in shock and the space becomes very quiet. Thankfully, nothing happens.

That night, Lha lung villagers celebrate the *lab tse* and '*cham* dance rituals. A TV announcer informs that the winners of the next year competition will be awarded 30,000 RMB to promote and continue folk archery culture. The Lha lung village chief comments that an opportunity has come for the village to regain its prestige.

Lha lung archers then purchase modern bows and arrows without letting the other villagers know. When archers from Mda' mo see the modern bows their eyes register surprise and Nyi ma comments, "Times change. Our bows need to catch up with this decade."

Predictably, in the ensuing archery competition between "traditional" and "modern," Mda' mo loses.

Although Lha lung archers receive much praise for winning, they feel deeply guilty about winning with the unfair advantage brought by the modern bows.

In the afternoon, as Bkra don's family watches a TV report on the competition, the village chief arrives with news that the county town government is planning to host the first Sacred Arrow Cup

International Traditional Archery Invitational Tournament, has asked an archer from both Lha lung and Mda' mo to participate.

For days, Bkra don learns more about archery from his father, who explains that certain dance movements depicted in the *thang kha* illustrate the archery skills of Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje who, as noted above, assassinated King Khri 'U'i dum brtsan while dancing 'cham, thus the 'cham dance became the origin of the archery festival and thrived in local communities.

One day, Bkra don climbs the rugged mountains to the cave and observes the painting very carefully, in a dark, tiny shrine lit by a butter lamp that brightens the dark shrine, illuminates his face, and lightens his inner heart. He practices the 'cham dance illustrated in the *thang kha* mural alone in the temple. The viewer then is taken to the stadium where competition proceeds according to modern rules, but in the absence of an enthusiastic audience, robust scream, and floating dust. In contrast, it is a covered stadium featuring limited space. Bkra don and Nyima earn equivalent marks and qualify for the Sacred Arrow Cup International Traditional Archery Invitational Tournament. They receive an enthusiastic welcome from residents of the two villages on the flat top of a mountain, who happily shout and circle in a beautiful sunset scene.

Soil/Earth plays a key role in the key protagonist's, Bkra don's, path to self-realization - from losing the peace and joy that comes from traditional rivalry, to abandoning the traditional bow, to picking up the traditional bow again.

Bkra don habitually takes a pinch of soil from the ground before he shoots an arrow. Soil is symbolic of rootedness and belonging. Before shooting an arrow in the stadium, he reaches down and touches the ground for a pinch of soil, but it is concrete. Feeling uncomfortable, he takes a bit of soil from a flower basin, suggesting that, the further a tradition is from its natal home, the less it retains of its original meaning.

Bkra don is in a silent dilemma, e.g., in the early morning of the second year's competition in drifting snow on a mountain slope, he grasps a traditional bow in this right hand and looks in the sky as snow

blows in his face and, maybe into his heart as well? Seemingly he is deliberating whether to use the traditional arrow during the next competition. In the event, he chooses a modern bow and arrow.

Within the past decade, Pema Tsenden has gained worldwide recognition for three feature films. *The Sacred Arrow* emulates the previous three in telling stories about contemporary Tibetans faced with conflicts that arise between maintaining tradition while dealing with the surging intrusion of modernity. *The Sacred Arrow* maintains Pema Tsenden's ambivalent tension between tradition and modernity. The film, however, departs from his previous films in terms of cinematic style. Many scenes in *The Sacred Arrow* follow the mainstream commercial cinema style with professional performers and "professionally" grand music.

From the first feature-length film to *Old Dog*, Pema's films feature a calmer exterior, but a more turbulent¹ interior. *The Silent Holy Stones*, for instance, tells the story of a young monk fascinated by a TV series adapted from the Chinese classic, *Journey to the West* (Frangville 2016:1). The use of long-takes and long shots in the course of the young monk's journey between his monastery to his home community for Lo gsar 'Tibetan New Year' and return to the monastery to participate in the Smon lam Festival contemplatively captures transitional moments of life in a colorless winter space.

In *The Search*, a film crew starts a painstaking journey looking for actors to perform in a film based on a famous play, *Dri med kun ldan*, of a prince who gives away all his property, and his wife, children, and his own eyes, to those who need them. In the course of the film crew's search in a four-wheel drive vehicle, they cross various Tibetan landscapes, including adobe compound farming villages, vast grasslands sprinkled with sheep, schoolyards full of students engaged in *sgor bro* 'circle dancing', monks in monasteries learning English from ABC, nightclubs frequented by college graduates, and illiterate performers in a Tibetan troupe in town.

Old Dog is a tale of conflict between a herdsman and his aging father centered on an old Tibetan mastiff. The old dog is important for

¹<http://goo.gl/nDZxdC>, accessed 6 April 2016.

his spirit of dignity. Tibetan mastiffs are prized as pets by Chinese businessmen and the sale of a single mastiff might net untold riches. This translates into mastiffs being stolen for sale on the black market.

Blo chos's son, Mgon bo, secretly sells the dog to a Chinese dealer in the local town. Blo chos then goes to the town and reclaims the dog. This incident propels a chain of selling, stealing, and reclaiming the old dog, which becomes increasingly worrisome. Blo chos tries to save the old dog by designating the dog as *tshe thar*, which locally means it cannot be sold or used for profit. However, the dog is stolen by a local villager and then later discovered in the black market in the town. In reclaiming the dog, Mgon po fights the thief. Finally, unable to think of other solutions, Blo chos kills the dog that has been his faithful companion for years to liberate both the dog and himself.

The route to and from pasture and town is portrayed using mostly a fixed camera in natural light, zigzag dusty roads, depressingly grey skies, and endless sounds of construction. This creates a wordless depressing tone of culture in danger of disappearing.

Each of the above films is a journey in search of an answer. Pema Tseden said,

What I am doing is not to search for my origin or root but to contemplate and explore the future" [and except for *The Sacred Arrow*] ... They share the quality of promising completeness and stability by returning to the same point. Yet these promises are not realized (Berry 2016:8).

Along each journey in this marathon, modernity and tradition are depicted, while maintaining a neutral stance as an observer narrating the condition of contemporary Tibetans.

The Sacred Arrow seemingly leads to an optimistic resolution to explorations in meshing tradition and modernity, bringing the protagonists back to where they began. At the very end of the film, while Nyi ma and Bkra don stand in the "stadium" - a predictable representative metaphor for "modernity" - they hold their traditional bows and arrows in the same, single frame. Modern, government-sponsored competition now solves conflict.

Additionally, the way of cinematic storytelling is slightly different in *The Sacred Arrow*, as compared to Pema Tseden's previous films. Long takes and long shots are favored as the camera tends to stay back, keeping the various characters in the frame, establishing a distance. Although we follow certain characters, we are observing them rather than being drawn into identifying with the protagonists in the film (Berry 2016:12). Wide angle and long shots are frequently implemented in his previous films. As Pema Tseden said:

I wanted to create a calm visual style. A distance between the camera, the characters and the sets, so that ... the audience can make their own decision. Through the narrative development, the audience can choose to get involved. The environment the characters are in is more important than their facial expression. Within the settings, we reveal human relationship, reveal the plot, and reveal the human condition (Asia Society 2010).

Pema Tseden with the assistance of cinematographer, Luo Pan (*Ganglameiduo* 2008), utilizes intense close-ups that lead us to more closely identify with the characters in the film.

The Sacred Arrow also differs from Pema Tseden's earlier films in that, apart from the protagonist, played by TV comedian Sman bla skyabs in *The Search*, all performers in his films are non-professional. In contrast, *The Sacred Arrow* features such well-known performers as Bkra shis don grub (*Ganglameiduo* 2008); Bkra don from the Lha sa Drama Troupe; Bsod nams nyi ma, a model from Khams; Stobs rgyal (*Mountain Patrol* 2014, *Prince of the Himalayas* 2006; *No Man's Land* 2013); Blo bzang chos 'phel (Lopsang) (*Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* 1998; *Prince of the Himalayas* 2006), and Bde skyid (*Taste of Tsampa* 2010).

Except for *The Silent Holy Stones*, Pema Tseden has not used strident soundtracks. He attempts to use diegetic sounds, avoiding the intrusion of the director's subjective perspectives. However, for *The*

Sacred Arrow, he invited Ricky Ho (*Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* 2011) of Singapore to compose music.¹

The Sacred Arrow is comparatively less circulated internationally, compared to his previous films. After a long journey marked by rivalry and conflict between the two villages, local officials find a solution. Conflicts are resolved in shouts of joy, amid beautiful images, and the resounding sound of an orchestra, reflecting government influence in film production.

The film's striking, orchestral soundtrack contributes to publicizing exotic Tibetan archery, local historic sites, and Gcan tsa's impressive scenery. The film will surely attract more tourists to the area where it was filmed.

The director arranged the protagonists to return to where their journey began. However, whether they truly return to the "village" and maintain a traditional form of archery and all that it represents - even with government support - is another question.

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¹ In 2011, Ho received the Best Original Film Music Award at the Taiwan Golden Film Festival for *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*. I believe this is the first work Ricky Ho did for a Tibetan film, which was obviously influenced by the *Himalaya* (directed by Eric Valli, 1999) soundtrack.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'cham འཆམ།
 a mdo ཨ་མདོ།
 au dum btsan ཨུ་དུམ་བཙན།
 banmadorji, pad ma rdo rje བཞུ་མདོ་རྩེ།
 bde skyid བདེ་སྦྱིད།
 Beijing 北京
 bkra don བཀྲ་དོན།

blo bzang chos 'phel བློ་བཟང་ཆོས་འཕེལ།
 bsod nams nyi ma བསོད་ནམས་ཉི་མ།
 Chairman Mao, Mao Zedong 毛泽东
 dbus gtsang དབུས་གཙང་།
 dri med kun ldan འི་མེད་ཀུན་ལྷན།
 g.yang phyug mtsho གཡང་ཕུག་མཚོ།
 Ganglameiduo 冈拉梅朵, gangs lha me tog གངས་ལྷ་མེ་དོག
 gcan tsha གཙན་ཙ།
 gdugs dkar tshe ring གདུགས་དཀར་ཚེ་རིང་།
 glang dar ma གླང་དར་མ།
 gling rgyal གླིང་རྒྱལ།
 grong khyer gyi 'tsho ba གྲོང་ཁྱེར་གྱི་འཚོ་བ།
 Guangzhou 广州
 Hodoyama Yiho, Chengshan Yifan 程山依凡
 Hong Kong, Xianggang 香港
 Huangchojia, dpal mchog rgyal དཔལ་མཆོག་རྒྱལ།
 khri ka ཁྲི་ཀ།
 klu rol ཀླུ་རོལ།
 la zhi ba ལ་ཞི་བ།
 lab tse ལབ་ཙེ།
 lha lung ལྷ་ལུང་།
 lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje ལྷ་ལུང་དཔལ་གྱི་རྡོ་རྗེ།
 Lhasa, lha sa ལྷ་ས།
 lho kha'i rtsom rig sgyu rtsal ལྷོ་ཁའི་རྩོམ་རིག་སྤྱུ་རྩལ།
 Liu Fang 刘芳
 lo sar ལོ་སར།
 Luo Pan 罗攀
 Lü Songye 吕松野
 mang tshogs sgyu rtsal མང་ཚོགས་སྤྱུ་རྩལ།
 mda' mo མདའ་མོ།
 mdzo sna མཛོ་སྤྲ།
 mkh' byams rgyal kha shem gyal མཁའ་བྱམས་རྒྱལ།
 mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།
 nyi ma ཉི་མ།

pema tseden, pad+ma tshe brtan པདྨ་ཚེ་བདེན།
 rdo rje རོ་རྒྱེ།
 Ricky Ho, He Guojie 何国杰
 rin chen don grub རིན་ཆེན་དོན་གྲུབ།
 rlung rta རླུང་རྟ།
 rma chu མ་ཚུ།
 rma lho མ་ལྟོ།
 sangs rgyas rgya mtsho སངས་རྒྱས་རྒྱ་མཚོ། / sangs rgyas rgyal mtsho སངས་རྒྱས་
 རྒྱལ་མཚོ།
 sbyin pa སྤྱིན་པ།
 Shanghai 上海
 skal bzang rdo rje སྐལ་བཟང་རོ་རྒྱེ།
 sman bla skyabs སྐལ་བླ་སྐྱབས།
 Song Bing 宋冰
 stag rtse don 'grub སྟག་རེ་དོན་འགྲུབ།
 stobs rgyas སྟོབས་རྒྱས།
 thang kha ཐང་ཁ།
 tharlo, thar lo ཐར་ལོ།
 tsampa, rtsam pa ཅུམ་པ།
 Wang Xuebo 王学博
 Wu Leilei 吴蕾蕾
 zhi bde nyi ma ཞི་བདེ་ཉི་མ།